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Our War Ambassador at St. James's

THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF WALTER H. PAGE. In two volumes. Doubleday, Page & Company.

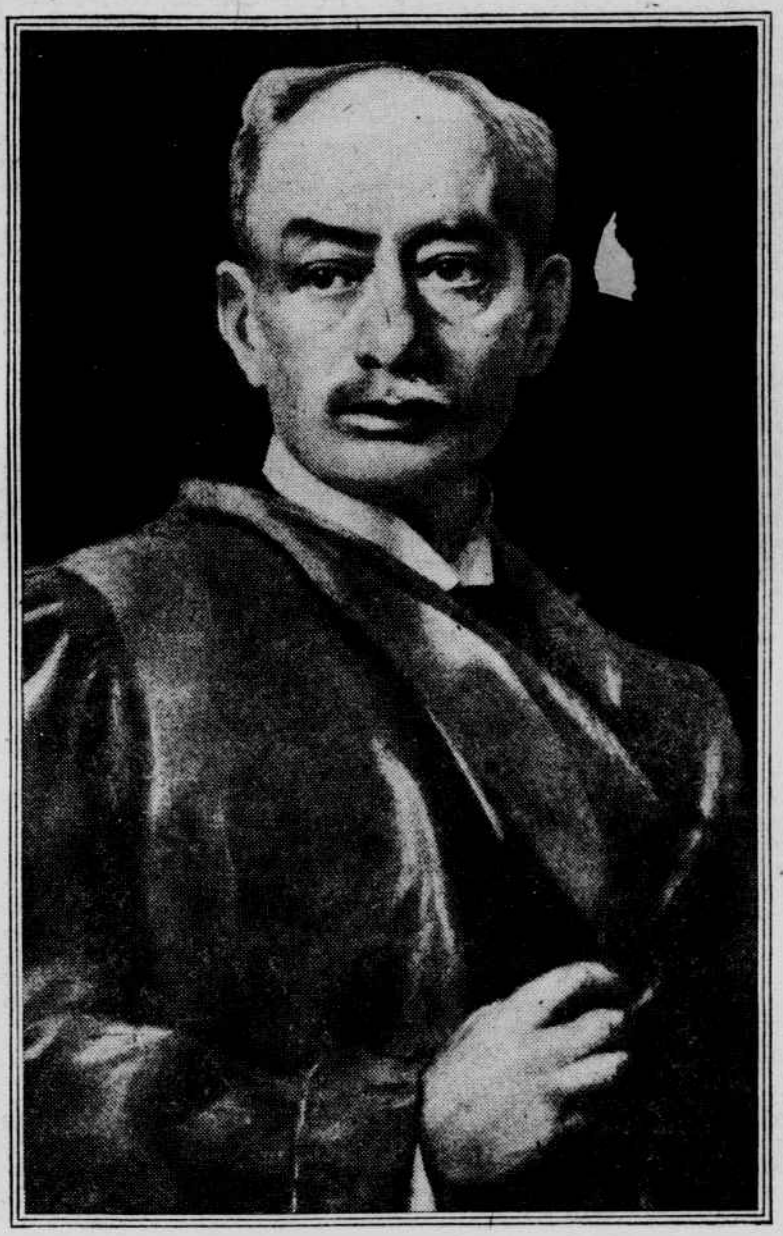
A Review. By LAWRENCE F. ABBOTT.

THIS distinguished book ought to hearten the faith of those who believe in democracy. It furnishes a lifelike and speaking portrait, largely painted by himself, of a devout and delightful democrat. It shows that a man of good taste, intellectual power, classical culture, and statesmanlike capacity and genius, may spring from the soil and may mature, unspoiled by the hurly burly of life, as well as from a pedigreed lineage and in an aristocratic atmosphere. There is a school of philosophy which holds that while democracy may increase the average of human comfort and happiness, it levels down the highest types of human beings in the process of raising the lowest types. Even so wise and eminent an authority as James Bryce thought that humdrum mediocrity is the greatest danger that social and political democracy has to face. Certainly Walter Page was neither humdrum nor mediocre, although he sprang from pioneer soil and pioneer parentage. His ancestors for several generations were of good stock, but his father was of the pioneer variety of man, "battling with the rocks in the Cape River, or penetrating the virgin pine forests, felling trees, and converting its raw materials to the uses of a growing civilization; like many of the Page breed, this Page was a giant in size and in strength, as sound morally and physically as the mighty forests in which a considerable part of his life was spent, brave, determined, aggressive, domineering almost to the point of intolerance, deeply religious and abstemious—a mixture of the frontier and the Old Testament prophet."

II.

Walter Hines Page, son of this pioneer, was born in North Carolina and in 1865, at 10 years of age, found himself in a home of a family formerly comparatively rich, but reduced by the civil war to comparative poverty. Nevertheless, the future Ambassador to England was sent to school probably at some self-sacrifice, as so many Southern boys of that time and lineage were. After an experimental and unsatisfactory trial of a North Carolina college he went to Randolph-Macon, in Virginia, where his classical training, especially in Greek, was so good that when he was not quite 21 years of age, he won a fellowship in Greek at the newly established Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore. At one time he intended to be a Methodist minister. Later this plan was changed to that of training himself to be a professor of Greek; and still later "when Professor Gildersleeve would assign him the Greek adverb [illegible], and direct him to study the peculi[illegible] of its use from Homer down to the Byzantine writers, he really found himself in pretty deep waters. Was it conceivable that a man could spend his lifetime in an occupation of this kind?"

Although his love of Greek poetry, and indeed of literature in general, remained with him throughout his life, he was really not essentially a classicist. He was a thoroughgoing modern, interested in the problems and progress of modern life. It was, therefore, natural for him to become a journalist. In pursuit of this trade, he wandered about the country, editing here and there, and writing newspaper correspondence here and there; but it was not until he became editor of the *Forum*, a monthly review like the English *Fortnightly* and *Contemporary*, that he began to make a national reputation.



Walter Hines Page.

From the *Forum* he was called to the editorship of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which position his name had been preceded by some of the most distinguished names in the history of American literature; among them those of James Russell Lowell, William D. Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich. In this position he succeeded just as he had in the editorial chair of the *Forum*. Mr. Ellery Sedgwick, the present proprietor and editor of the *Atlantic*, characterizes Walter Page in vivid and striking fashion:

> Were a visitant from another sphere to ask me for the incarnation of those qualities we love to call American, I should turn to the familiar gallery of my memory and point to the living portrait that hangs there of Walter Page. A sort of foursquareness, bluntness, it seemed to some; an uneasy, even explosive energy; a disposition to underrate fine drawn nicenesses of all sorts; ingrained Yankee commonsense checking his vaulting enthusiasm; enormous self-confidence; impatience of failure—all of these were in him; and he was besides affectionate to a fault, devoted to his country, his family, his craft—a strong, bluff, tender man.

From Boston Page came to New York and formed the partnership with Frank N. Doubleday which developed into the successful and influential firm of Doubleday, Page & Co. Mr. Page established the *World's Work*, a monthly periodical whose prime function was, to use his own words, "to interpret the new impulse in American life, the new feeling of nationality, our coming to realize ourselves; to my mind there is greater promise in democracy than men of any preceding period ever dared dream of—agressive democracy—growth by action."

For twelve years he devoted himself to his publishing and editorial work and to an equal amount of public work outside, especially in the field of education. He was an active member of the General Education Board and was wrapped up in plans and activities for the improvement of education and of agriculture in the South. This work required not only the kind of fundamental education in history, literature, both modern and ancient, and philosophy which Page had received as a young man, but it also demanded the exercise and development of a statesmanlike grasp of social and political problems. I do not suppose that many people outside of his intimates regarded him as a statesman. I know I never thought of him as a statesman. I knew him; respected him; liked him; admired him, but thought of him simply as a gifted and influential member of my own chosen trade—a journalist. I remember my feeling of surprise when in the spring of 1913 it was announced that he had been chosen by President Wilson to be Ambassador to Great Britain. So far as I knew he had never held any political office; he had never fulfilled any political mission; he was ten times as outspoken as any diplomatist I had ever met. He was "a strong, bluff, tender man." I thought of an Ambassador in terms of Gladstone, Lord Palmerston, Lord Salisbury and Lord Rosebery. How was this combination of Southern rebelliousness and Yankee bluntness to get on at the Court of St. James's?

III.

Well, this book shows how he got on as an Ambassador! Theodore Roosevelt writing on March 1, 1918, called him "the Ambassador who has represented America in London during these trying years as no other Ambassador in London has ever represented us with the exception of Charles Francis Adams during the civil war." The story of Walter Page's Ambassadorship is one of the most human and dramatic in diplomatic history. It proves him to have been of Presidential timber. Indeed, if he could have been President in 1912 and could have appointed Woodrow Wilson as Ambassador to Great Britain it would have been better for the country and might have been better for the world. For his ideals were as high as Mr. Wilson's; his belief in democracy was as profound, and he had far more vigor of initiative and

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